HOUSTON POST
14 FEB 1973

FBI: Recouping the liaison

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Informed sources in Washington are curious to see if the appointment of a director for the FBI will lead to more of a reorganization than the personnel-shuffling which has continued since J. Edgar Hoover's death.

There have been periodic cries for closer supervision, or rejiggering the control mechanisms, but such efforts overlook basic operational changes.

One suggestion, which has never gathered much steam, is for the FBI to hive off a distinct organization to cope with domestic counterintelligence.

The Bureau is the investigatory and executive police arm of the federal government. Its primary function is catching crooks who have broken the national law.

When espionage and subversion became an issue in the late 1930s, the Bureau inherited the job of coping. It established internal divisions to accommodate the new function, and through the years did a reasonably effective job.

But counterintelligence (or CI) work really has little in common with police work. It has far more in common with clandestine activities overseas, and almost every other major power maintains two intelligence services, an external one for overseas work and an internal one for domestic activities.

Since most domestic CI cases stem from leads acquired overseas, these two services are always in close liaison, although no nation has made the mistake of combining them under one roof.

Even in the Soviet Union, where both services are referred to as the "KGB," the work is divided between the external 1st Chief Directorate and the internal 2nd Chief Directorate, which have virtually no connection with each other.

Almost all major espionage cases which the Bureau has cracked in the last quarter century were based on leads supplied by the CIA.

Most "domestic" cases have their genesis overseas—it is difficult for a KGB officer in Washington to recruit Americans, what with the FBI in his hip pocket every time he sticks his nose out of the Soviet Embassy, but the same KGB officer can recruit Americans overseas, where he may not even be breaking local law in doing so.

(Most major British cases—Lonsdale, Houghton, Gee and Blake, for openers—were handed to Britain's MI-5 by the CIA as well.)

The system worked as long as liaison and cooperation between the FBI and the CIA was relatively open. But Hoover in his last years stoppered the exchange, and drove from his post the Bureau's major liaison contact. With the door slammed shut, the Bureau's CI track record dropped.

Such an organization, for domestic CI work, need not be a threat to civil liberties. The function is far better housed in a small group of professionals than entrusted—say—to the military, which is temperamentally unsuited for such work. It can continue to be housed in the Justice Department, at the disposal of the Attorney General.

Although the domestic security community has always been an easy target for partisan congressional attack, the record has been fairly good.

For all his testy ranting, Hoover never loosed the Bureau in the political arena, and in the domestic security field, civil liberties had far less to fear from the FBI than they did from Congress itself.

McCarthyism, after all, was born on the floor of the Senate, and the antic excesses of the House Unamerican Affairs Committee were always viewed with utter contempt by professional CI officers.